UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Agricultural Conservation Program Service
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QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS REGARDING
THE AGRICULTURAL CONSERVATION PROGRAM

Professional workers in agriculture are generally specialists and confine their service to a specific field. However, they also have a joint responsibility and opportunity to serve farm people by helping them to learn about, understand, and use all needed available services.

Each at least needs to be informed about other public programs intended to help farm people that are related to his. This information about each such program should include understanding the purposes, general provisions, local source of specific information farmers may need, and inter-relationships with his own and other programs.

These questions and answers about the Agricultural Conservation Program are made available to provide some of the information needed by those whose work is related to and affected by the Agricultural Conservation Program.

The ASC State Committee or the ACP Specialist in the ASC State Office will provide additional information and assistance upon request. Detailed information about annual program provisions may also be procured by those interested from the ASC State or County Committee serving the area.

1. What is the purpose of the ACP?

Beginning in 1936 the Congress authorized a program of soil-building practices and soil- and water-conserving practices called the Agricultural Conservation Program to carry into effect " . . . (1) Preservation and improvement of soil fertility; (2) promotion of the economic use and conservation of land; (3) diminution of exploitation and wasteful and unscientific use of national soil resources; (4) the protection of rivers and harbors against the results of soil erosion in aid of maintaining the navigability of waters and water courses and in aid of flood control . . . "

The objective and purpose of the ACP are stated in the Secretary's Foreword to the 1955 National Bulletin, as follows: "The primary objective of the program is the protection of the public's interest in the Nation's soil and water resources.

"The 1955 program has one purpose and one purpose only. It is to advance the over-all conservation accomplishment of the Nation. How well it succeeds will depend almost completely on how well it

is used by local groups and individual farmers to meet the community and individual farm conservation problems of soil and water conservation which farmers and ranchers otherwise would not solve in 1955.

"Through it the work of research, education, and technical assistance in soil and water conservation can be extended and made more effective."

The Foreword to the 1956 National Agricultural Conservation Program Bulletin provides for continuing the basic principles of previous Agricultural Conservation Programs and includes the following statements:

" . . . Cost-sharing under the Agricultural Conservation Program is an important and effective means through which landowners and operators are aided in doing essential conservation work needed in the public interest. . . .

" . . . We hope that the Nation's farmers and ranchers will join in using the program to meet, more than ever before, the community and individual farm conservation problems which would not otherwise be solved. In particular, the 1956 program should be used to the maximum extent to insure the protection and improvement of our valuable farmlands now being diverted from normal crop uses."

The program principles are set out in the National ACP Bulletin for the year.

2. Who may participate in the ACP?

Any farmer (or rancher) may request the Federal Government to share the cost of conservation practices included in the county ACP on which he needs cost-sharing on his farm.

3. What amount of assistance is available to an individual farmer through the ACP?

The ASC county committee determines the extent to which Federal funds will be made available to share the cost of each practice approved for a farm, taking into consideration the county allocation of funds, conservation problems in the county, and the problems on the individual farm. The total of all Federal cost-sharing under a program to any one person is limited (for example, $1,500 for certain program years).

4. What is the relationship of ACP to other USDA programs?

The public has provided several basic resources or tools to help farmers develop and carry out area and farm conservation programs. These resources and tools include research, educational services, conservation program planning, technical services, credit and cost-sharing. The principal cost-sharing resource is the Agricultural Conservation Program.

A sound program of public cost-sharing is dependent upon:

(1) An adequate research program to insure soundness,
(2) An aggressive and effective education program to bring information and motivation along with certain skills,
(3) Sources of technical services to supply skills not readily acquired by many farmers,
(4) Credit adapted to farm needs,
(5) Adapted commercial services and materials available where and when needed.

Private enterprise has developed numerous services to help meet needs such as those referred to. Also, the U. S. Department of Agriculture and other governmental agencies (Federal and State) have developed various action programs needed, in the public interest, to encourage or stimulate needed progress in solving problems in that field. The ACP and these other official action programs are intended to supplement each other in their service to farmers, in a setting of a farmer-business-government participation. The Department of Agriculture services and private services having to do with conservation have a relationship and inter-dependence for their success comparable to the implements a farmer uses to grow a crop.

In carrying out a conservation project, a farmer will use only the service intended for that particular phase of the undertaking. The effectiveness of one service (such as cost-sharing) is dependent on how good a job other services have done (such as research, education, and technical assistance) -- just as the planter is dependent upon the plows and harrows to prepare a seedbed, if a good job of planting is to be done.

Farmers requesting ACP cost-sharing are encouraged to relate their requests to the furtherance of progress on any written farm or project plans that they have developed with the assistance of any agency (for example, Soil Conservation District, Farmers Home Administration, Extension Service, Vocational Agriculture, or a commercial farm management agency). If cost-sharing is approved by the ASC county committee for certain practices which require technical determinations, the Soil Conservation Service and the Forest Service are assigned technical responsibilities.

In general, educational work on ACP is the responsibility of the regular educational agencies in the field of agriculture.

5. What types of conservation practices are eligible for cost-sharing under ACP?

The types of eligible practices might be considered under four groups:

(1) Practices to establish or improve grass and legume cover for soil or watershed protection. Examples include the initial establishment of grasses and legumes and the initial improvement of established grasses and legumes.

(2) Practices to provide cover, green manure, and improve the organic content of the soil. Examples include seeding of grasses, small grains, and legumes as cover or green manure crops.
(3) Practices in land, soil, and water management to provide for soil protection and improvement by controlling the flow of water on the surface or by improving drainage, and to conserve water. Examples include establishing contour and field stripcropping, sod waterways, and terrace systems; constructing farm drainage systems, or water storage for better livestock distribution, irrigation, or erosion control; and reorganizing irrigation systems for water conservation.
(4) Practices to provide forestry and other benefits by new plantings of trees or shrubs or by improvement of existing stands of forest trees.

6. What determines which practices are eligible for cost-sharing on a particular farm?

Farmers who desire to participate in the Agricultural Conservation Program list with the ASC county office the conservation practices for which they are requesting assistance and indicate the number of units (acres, tons, cubic yards, etc.) of each practice for which they desire cost-sharing. In order to stay within available funds, the ASC county committee does not always approve cost-sharing for each practice or for the number of units of a practice for which cost-sharing has been requested on a particular farm.

Under certain circumstances, approval for cost-sharing exactly as requested may not be approved because, in the judgment of the committee, the practice will not be carried out in proper sequence, is not needed to the extent indicated, is not feasible under the particular conditions, is considered to be established and therefore a routine farming operation, or some other circumstances indicate that the expenditure of public funds is not justified.

After the county committee makes its determinations, each farmer is notified of the practice or practices approved for cost-sharing on his farm, the units of practices approved, and the dollars-and-cents assistance available to him for the approved practice or practices when performed according to specifications.

7. What provision is there for providing needed technical assistance?

Most engineering or construction practices such as contour stripcropping or practices involving water management and storage are carried out under the supervision of Soil Conservation Service technicians. They perform the following services for such practices:

(1) Make a finding that the practice is needed and practicable on the farm;
(2) Make necessary site selection, other preliminary work, and layout work of the practice;

(3) Perform necessary supervision of the installation; and
(4) Make certification of performance.

The Forest Service is responsible for providing needed technical assistance with respect to forestry practices.

The State Agricultural Experiment Stations or their representatives provide soil-testing facilities for determining mineral needs.

8. Does the ACP help a farmer obtain materials and services needed in carrying out conservation practices?

Part or all of the Federal cost-sharing for an approved practice may be in the form of conservation materials or services furnished through the program for use in carrying out the practice. Where conservation materials or services are furnished, the farmer will pay that part of the cost of the material or service which is in excess of the Federal cost-share attributable to the use of the material or service. Materials and services available through the program include minerals, planting stock (such as seeds and trees), earth-moving services, and construction materials.

9. When does a farmer receive the cost-sharing assistance provided under the ACP?

That part of the cost-sharing assistance approved for a farm which is in the form of conservation materials or services, will be made available at the time the practice is carried out. Upon completion of a practice, the farmer files with the ASC county committee a report containing necessary information concerning the completion of the practice. If a cash payment is due the farmer, applications for payment are then completed and the ACP assistance in the form of a check from the Federal Government will be mailed direct to the farmer.

The U. S. Congress usually does not provide funds through the appropriation acts until July of each calendar year and, therefore, applications for ACP cash payments for a particular program cannot be paid by the Federal Government until the last six months of that year.

10. What obligations are assumed by persons requesting cost-sharing assistance through the ACP?

Since the Agricultural Conservation Program provides cost-sharing assistance on a partnership basis, those who participate are responsible for arranging for and seeing that the conservation project is carried out in keeping with the specifications in the program. They also must pay about 50 percent of the cash costs and, in many cases, furnish equipment and labor services, in addition. They are responsible for carrying out related activities necessary to the solution of the conservation problem.

They must comply with State laws or other regulatory measures that affect the practice for which cost-sharing is requested. They

obligate themselves to request assistance only for conservation projects that would not be carried out otherwise and to maintain necessary records to substantiate their claims for assistance. They undertake to make their requests, file needed information, and to otherwise comply with the conditions under which cost-sharing assistance is offered.

Among the major responsibilities that farmers or ranchers assume is that of maintaining the conservation practices for which they have received cost-sharing to assure their normal span of usefulness and to replace them, when it becomes necessary, if still needed in their farm conservation programs.

11. What are the functions of ASC community committeemen, particularly as related to the ACP?

Each county in the State is divided into communities. The community committee is composed of three members and two alternates elected by farmers participating in USDA programs in the community. The community committee assists the county committee in selecting practices on which cost-sharing is needed and which should be included in the ACP for the county. The community committeemen are responsible for assisting farmers having soil and water conservation problems and who desire to participate in the ACP by giving them information on the conservation practices for which cost-sharing is available, how to enroll, how to perform the practices, and how to report performance. The community committee also:

(1) Assists the county committee in carrying out programs assigned to it;
(2) Informs farmers concerning the purposes and provisions of programs being administered in the county by the county committee;
(3) Assists in arranging for and conducting the necessary community meetings of program participants; and
(4) Performs such other duties as may be assigned to it by the county office manager under the direction of the county committee.

12. How are ASC county and community committeemen chosen?

Community and county committeemen are elected annually following this procedure: In each county there is an election board composed of the Extension Agent, as chairman, and heads of the Soil Conservation Service and Farmers Home Administration in the county and the county head of each general farm organization operating in the county. The county election board appoints a community election board for each community in the county. Each community election board is composed of three farmers other than incumbent ASC community or county committeemen. The community election board conducts the election of community committeemen either through ballots sent to all farmers through the mail or by called election meetings presided over by the chairman of the community election

board. Community election board members serve without pay.

The chairman of each elected community committee represents the community at a convention for the election of an ASC county committee. The delegates to the county convention (community committee chairmen), at a set time and place, convene and elect by secret ballot a county committee composed of three members and two alternates, each of whom is a resident farmer. In the election procedure the delegates indicate which member is chairman, vice chairman, and regular member.

13. How is an annual ACP developed — National, State, County?

The National Agricultural Conservation Program is generally developed as follows:

Annually, each ASC State Committee is asked to get suggestions through the ASC county committees from all interested groups and organizations in each county. They are also asked to consult with Federal and State Government agencies having conservation responsibilities, State-wide farm organizations, and other interested groups and get their assistance in analyzing the suggestions submitted by ASC county committees.

Each ASC State Committee then forwards suggestions for a National program to the ACP Service in Washington. The Administrators of ACPS and SCS and the Chief of the U. S. Forest Service review the recommendations and agree on those practices that should be recommended to the Secretary of Agriculture for inclusion in the National Agricultural Conservation Program. The Agricultural Conservation Program National Bulletin issued by the Secretary of Agriculture includes a list of conservation practices approved for use wherever needed, together with the maximum rates of assistance and other essential details of the National Program.

The State Agricultural Conservation Program is developed about as follows:

Generally upon receipt of the National ACP Bulletin, heads of all agricultural agencies, Federal and State, and of other interested organizations are invited to a meeting to consider practices on which cost-sharing is needed and which should be included in the ACP State Handbook. The final practices selected for inclusion in the ACP State Handbook must be agreed upon by the ASC State Committee, the State Conservationist of the SCS, and the State representative of the U. S. Forest Service. The State Handbook includes the practices considered needed in all parts of the State, the maximum rates of Federal cost-sharing for these practices, and detailed specifications of how the practices should be performed.

The county ACP is developed about as follows:

Upon receipt of the State Handbook of practices, the ASC county committee meets with the heads of the State and Federal agencies

and organizations of farmers operating in the county. At this meeting the provisions of the State and National Agricultural Conservation Programs are reviewed. The soil and water conservation problems of the local farmers, the objectives of the local conservation program, the kinds and amounts of aid that may be available from other sources, together with the possibilities for cost-sharing through the ACP, are all considered.

On the basis of such information and understanding the group recommends the conservation practices and rates of cost-sharing to be included in the county ACP. At the conclusion of such a meeting, the ASC county committee, the technician representing the SCS in the county, and the representative of the U. S. Forest Service operating in the county agree upon the practices and other provisions of the county ACP. Upon approval by the ASC State Office, the county ACP is then prepared and made available to farmers and others.

14. To what extent can the county ACP be adapted to meet local soil and water conservation problems?

There are a number of flexible features in the ACP which make it possible for the local group to tailor the county ACP to fit local conservation problems. Some of these are mentioned below.

The county group may include in a county Agricultural Conservation Program any number or combination of the conservation practices included in either the ACP State Handbook or the National ACP Bulletin. If there are conservation problems that cannot be handled by these practices or combinations of practices, new practices may be developed.

The specifications for carrying out the practices are expected to be adapted to local conditions.

Cost-sharing rates for practices included in the program may be reduced for some practices below those in the State program and, under certain conditions, increased for others.

The county committee has wide discretion as to the practices and the amount of cost-sharing it approves for an individual farm. Likewise, the committee may use any part of its county program funds for practices to be carried out in designated watersheds, thus dovetailing the county ACP into watershed projects.

If conservation materials or services must be obtained by farmers to carry out approved practices, they may be furnished under the ACP. Cost-sharing assistance may be pooled by a group of farmers to carry out a project that is essential in dealing with a community conservation problem.

15. Who administers and otherwise services the ACP — Federal, State, County?

The Secretary of Agriculture is responsible for the administration of the ACP. His responsibilities are discharged through an Assistant Secretary in charge of Federal-States Relations. The Administrator of the Agricultural Conservation Program Service, responsible to the Assistant Secretary, is delegated much of the administrative responsibility.

Within each State, the ACP is administered by the ASC State Committee, assisted by designated representatives of the Soil Conservation Service and the Forest Service. The ASC State Committee is composed of three farmers, appointed by the Secretary of Agriculture, and the State Director of Extension Service. The ACP operations and policies established by the ASC State Committee are handled by a Program Specialist in charge of ACP work.

Within the county, the ACP is administered by the ASC County Committee, assisted by designated representatives of the SCS and the FS. This committee, which is composed of three farmers and generally the County Agricultural Extension Agent, carries out its responsibilities under the supervision of the ASC State Committee and utilizes the community committeemen and employed personnel. The committee is also responsible for the administration of adjustment programs which include acreage allotments, marketing quotas, and price support activities.

16. How is the ACP related to the Soil Conservation District program?

The Agricultural Conservation Program is one of the important tools available to assist in carrying out the soil conservation program of the District. Any soil conservation practices approved for cost-sharing within a county will be among those that are essential on some farms in order to achieve the Soil Conservation District program objectives. The members of the governing body of the Soil Conservation District join with the other groups having conservation responsibilities in developing the annual ACP for the county.

A farmer participating in the ACP is encouraged to use the available cost-sharing assistance in carrying out the conservation plan that he has developed for his farm through the assistance of the Soil Conservation District. With all interested groups working together to develop a county ACP, cost-sharing will be offered on the most needed practices included in the plan that each farmer has developed through the assistance of the District.